

On the loss of a Pet

Those of us who bring you the Open Mind Column sometimes refer to our editing group as our own personal “therapy group”. Through the process of bringing what we hope are interesting and valuable articles to help people consider different aspects of mental health and reduce its stigma, we sometimes share our own life experiences when we need the support of friends or a fresh perspective on life’s journey.

This week we had one of those days. Our friend experienced an overwhelming loss. She was faced with the incredibly difficult decision to end her dog’s life. She had shared many stories over the past year with us about her companion’s condition. We journeyed with her as she spent countless hours feeding him by hand, taking him to appointments, trying numerous treatments and supporting his quality of life in many ways, allowing him to live his life to the fullest.

Together we decided to write an article on this “special” type of grief because we felt that there are likely many people who have been in a similar situation, grieving over the loss of their pet companions. Pets can really provide us with significant relationships in our lives. They comfort us, love us and unconditionally accept us. They are also our companions for joy, fun and laughter. So, it makes sense that when that relationship is lost, people can feel devastated.

As with any type of loss, people grieve differently and at different paces. Grief can also be complicated with many different emotions that may include anger, guilt and depression. It is important to be honest with yourself about your feelings and to have some supports with whom you can discuss your thoughts. Friends and family are often good social supports and can offer perspective on what you are going through. Also please consider talking to your vet. They are often trained to have these difficult conversations with people. There is even a pet loss hot line for those in our area. It is run by the University of Guelph Veterinary Students, but only during the school year. They can be reached at 519-824-4120 x 53694, e-mail petloss@uoguelph.ca.

Some people have put their grief into words or works of art, like picture collages, that can help us to remember and share with others. Please use the internet, or library resources to find something that is right for you. By Googling “pet loss”, many sites come up. Some have memorial products to purchase; others have stories and printable leaflets to help you sort through your feelings. I even found some sites that link you to people who have experienced the same kind of loss and their supportive comments may be helpful.

Some further helpful suggestions include not throwing out all of your animal’s things too early. You might find it difficult to have them around in the early moments after their death. Their bed, toys or feeding dishes can be painful reminders, but later may be items of comfort. Another suggestion is to try to rearrange your schedule so that you are doing something productive or self -comforting at the times that you used to spend with your pet. If you had a cat that you brushed at a certain time of day, maybe you could take up a new hobby of knitting or woodworking. If you went walking with your pet, maybe you could still keep walking with friends or do an exercise video. Find something that feels right to you.

Grieving over a pet, like any grief, is a process. It cannot be rushed no matter how much we long to just feel better. Over time the pain will lessen and we will heal. In the mean time, consider that grief is the last honor we give our animals. It comes from a place of love for them. Our grief commemorates their lives and all that they were to us. Try to respect this process by focusing on all of the blessings that having a pet brought to your life.

This article was written by Paula Frappier, an Open Mind Group member, and an Occupational Therapist with Homewood, Trellis Mental Health and Developmental Services and St. Joseph’s Health Centre. The “Open Mind” column is sponsored by individuals and organizations concerned with mental health issues in rural Wellington and Dufferin counties. Contact Canadian Mental Health Association at 519-766-4450 ext. 231 or parkinsons@cmhagrb.on.ca. For access to all Open Mind columns and local mental health resources/ information, visit www.cmhagrb.on.ca or www.communitytorchlight.com